

Punton (J.)

[Reprint from the ALIENIST & NEUROLOGIST, July, 1897.]

## **The Civic Duties and Responsibilities of the Physician to his Community, State and Nation.\***

BY JOHN PUNTON, M.D., Kansas City, Mo.

Professor of Nervous and Mental Diseases, University Medical College;  
Neurologist to All Saints, German-Scarritt, K. C., F. S. & M.,  
and Mo. Pac. R. R., Hospitals, etc.

**T**HE closing days of the 19th century are characterized by a feverish activity in all departments of learning unsurpassed in any previous period of the world's history.

Perhaps in no department is this more conspicuous and striking than is found associated with the science of medicine. In its voluminous annals there never was a time when it was capable of scoring so many brilliant victories over the enemy, death, and its allied forces as the present. Indeed so remarkable has been the changes that our very proficiency is already threatening us with dire disaster and our greed for scientific development and attainment has become so very morbid that it is actually furnishing the means for our own suicide.

Moreover the medical profession taken as a whole was never in a more perturbed and unsettled state or more envious and jealous of each other's welfare than now.

Hence the former respect and influence which not only characterized but was willingly granted the profession by the laity, has gradually been withdrawn, until to-day the practice of medicine is simply regarded by them, as a mere business, trade or commercial calling.

\*Read by title before the Missouri State Medical Association, May 20, 1897, at St. Louis, Mo.

In view of such facts it is fitting that we take time to enquire into some of the causes which has led up to this unfortunate state of affairs and see if we cannot devise some means or methods to regain our former social prestige and standing, beside elevate our ethical standard toward each other.

In the past the doctor was recognized in every community as the most influential citizen in addition to his purely medical skill and knowledge. While this may possibly be true in some notable exceptions to-day, yet they are so very rare that the great mass of our profession in every city and community have not as much relative influence and importance as formerly. Indeed the term "Doctor" has become so very common and its application abused to such an extent that the dignity and respect which formerly belonged to our profession has lost much of its significance and value.

In tracing the earlier history of our country it is surprising to find the power and influence wielded by the members of the medical profession in every community.

Whenever a step in advance was contemplated the doctor was invariably appealed to for his wise counsel and support and the name of some honored member of our profession was associated with every local movement in which the community as a whole were interested.

Closely allied to him were members of both the professions of law and theology and much of what we are to-day we owe to their united efforts.

But who can deny the fact that the three so-called learned professions have lost much of their former social prestige and standing, and to-day they do not enjoy the same relative importance and influence they once did. More especially is this true of the medical profession taken as a whole, although undoubtedly there are notable exceptions to this common rule.

It is interesting, therefore, at this juncture to listen to a layman's criticism and see ourselves as viewed through the public eye, for after all it is to persons outside of our own ranks that we must mainly depend for our support and



their advice should certainly be of some interest and value to us in the correction of our mistakes.

For this purpose I cannot do better than call your attention to some remarks made by no less a person than Mr. Cleveland, ex-President of the United States, in his recent speech to the members of the New York Academy of Medicine, in which he justly criticises our present methods and undertakes to give us good reasons for our present deterioration, and certainly he is in a position to know something of our failures as well as our successes.

After paying a very graceful tribute to the village doctor of fifty years ago, he adds: "The village doctor was not only our physician but he was a man of influence in all the neighboring affairs. In every matter of importance that concerned the good of the community, he was at the front. He was president of the village or represented his town in the county board of superiors and if he was ever late in visiting his patient, it was because he lingered at the post-office to discuss the political situation. Thus he joined with the performance of professional duty, a discharge of the obligation of citizenship. We cannot but think that the discoveries and improvements in medical practice which we now enjoy are dearly bought if the members of the profession in their onward march have left behind them their sense of civic obligation and their interest in the general public welfare. While thus suggesting the need of your influence in legislative circles for the accomplishment of reforms related to your profession, you will, I hope, permit me in conclusion to enjoin upon you the duty of an active and general interest and participation in public affairs for the promotion of your country's good in all its phases. Never did patient need your medical treatment more than the body Politic now needs the watchful care of your patriotic and disinterested citizenship."

You will observe that the burden of Mr. Cleveland's remarks is to the effect that as a profession we are sadly deficient in our civic duties and responsibilities to our community, state and nation. In other words, we are in a certain sense, disloyal citizens, that our greed for scientific

attainment consumes all our time and causes us to become intensely selfish, hence we forget all about our obligations as citizens, that we take no interest whatever in public affairs unless it be for individual, financial benefit, that the large and generous public service, which was formerly a marked characteristic of our professional life has entirely been withdrawn and if by any chance we are found in the field of politics it is largely for individual revenue.

I trust in quoting these remarks of Mr. Cleveland's and commenting on them in this way that I may not be accused of urging upon the physician the necessity of becoming politicians in the commonly accepted sense of the word, far from this, for if there is anything that I despise more than another it is the doctor who is more proficient in politics than medicine and who can always find time to attend political gatherings but has never been known to attend a medical convention much less read or write a medical essay.

But there is a sense in which every physician should become known as a politician, by taking especial interest in public affairs which directly pertain to his obligation as a citizen and no amount of professional pride or interest in his special scientific work should rob him of this great duty. It is not only expected but required of every American citizen that he be willing to bear his share of the public burdens and take an active participation in the body politic, and physicians form no exception to this recognized duty. That we as physicians fall short of our duties and privileges in this direction is idle comment and much of our present deterioration is undoubtedly due to this very cause. Hence the criticisms of not only Mr. Cleveland but others who make the same accusations, are in my opinion just and fully deserving and it behooves us, not only as citizens, but as physicians, to become more generous in the public service of our community, state and nation.

In the general administration of public affairs, there are sociologic problems presented in every community which appeal to the knowledge and best interest of every department of life.



Many of these are of a purely medical character and require the very best talent in our profession to solve them correctly. Unfortunately many of the more important of these are wholly ignored and allowed to pass by from year to year on the principle that what is everybody's business is no one's business. Others are referred to very incompetent persons and when the verdict has been rendered, we look at each other and cry shame. For instance, in our own city the personnel of the county court consists of three non-medical men and yet often some of the most perplexing questions pertaining to insanity and other medical questions are necessarily referred and left entirely to their judgment for solution. As well might you ask a layman to detect endocarditis who had never listened to the normal heart sounds, as to expect these gentlemen to solve such difficult medical problems arightly.

Then again the education of our children demands the interest and attention of the medical profession, for I am convinced that public school education ought not to be left solely in the hands of the pedagogue; but that it has a medical aspect of the highest importance. For instance, it has been demonstrated beyond a doubt that the medical output of the pupil is directly related to his height, weight and physical measurements and that there is a physical basis for precocity on the one hand and mental dullness on the other. Many a child is compelled to sacrifice its constitution for what is now deemed its educational necessities.

In a paper (see *Neuropathic Constitution and Education as a Factor in the Causation of Nervous Diseases*) which I read before the local medical society four years ago, I called attention to the fact that it was my firm conviction that a wisely selected medical board should be appointed in every city and town whose duties should be to visit the public schools and inspect the pupils and determine their physical condition as well as their capacity to study, beside pass on the sanitary condition of the building. This statement which at the time was received in the light of a joke, nevertheless, strange as it may appear, was actually put in practical operation, inside of twenty months, in no

less a place than the so-called center of American culture, viz., Boston, and to-day it affords me pleasure to present a few extracts from the first report just issued of the medical inspection of Boston public schools. The schools were visited daily and all the children who complained of illness or who appeared ill were examined.

"For fourteen months ending December 31st, 16,790 pupils were examined, 10,737 of whom were found to be ill; 6,053 were found not to be ill and 2,041 of these were too ill to remain in school for the day. There were 77 cases of diphtheria, 28 cases of scarlet fever, 116 of measles, 28 of chicken-pox, 69 of pediculosis, 47 of scabies, 47 of mumps, 33 of whooping cough and 8 of congenital syphilis in children, sitting in their seats and spreading these diseases to other children. The remaining 10,372 sick children were suffering from a large variety of diseases."

"These results justify the work so far and show the need of extending it." A corps of medical inspectors sufficiently large to permit an intelligent physician to spend at least a few minutes daily in every school room, would detect many cases needing attention, yet not apparent to the teacher. Much of the sickness and enfeebled state of school children is due to the condition of their school rooms.

New York City has also lately followed in the wake of Boston by appointing medical inspectors of public schools for the purpose of reducing the number of contagious diseases. Now I contend that what is good for Boston and New York is good for St. Louis and Kansas City, indeed every large or small city all over the country and it is our business to insist upon its enforcement.

Then again in state medicine very little interest is now taken by our profession in matters which are purely medical and we can hardly expect our legislators to formulate and pass laws, the necessity of which they are largely ignorant of. It is our business and duty to inform them and call their attention, say for instance, to the needs of certain of the helpless and afflicted classes who by virtue of their ailments are unable to help themselves.

In a paper (See *Medical Review*, St. Louis) read before



the state association three years ago, I urged the necessity of state provision being made for the helpless class known as the feeble-minded. All present agreed that it was a great and growing necessity but like many other similar questions, no steps were taken to secure it. In this state alone there are at least one thousand of these poor, afflicted, feeble-minded children who are not only burdens to themselves, but also to those who are now compelled to care for them. The majority belong to families who are too poor to properly provide for their comfort. What is sadly needed in Missouri is a home for these poor creatures furnished by the state. It is to the medical profession that they naturally look for aid and support and it is our duty to champion their cause and insist on the needed state provision being made for them. Moreover, special state provision for epileptics have been for some time a recognized need in this state.

There are at least two thousand helpless epileptics in Missouri who instinctively turn to us for sympathy and help. Modern medical science teaches us that the state insane asylum is no suitable place for the confinement of such patients. What is sadly needed is a home specially provided for their exclusive care. Many states of the union have already made such provision and Missouri can well afford to be as humane and philanthropic as other states.

In recording one need after another, I fear you will accuse me of asking too much at one time but this is simply a sad reflection on our past negligence of duty. Our interest in these helpless invalids is only aroused spasmodically and then the attack does not last long enough to accomplish anything. Mr. Cleveland strikes the key note of our true situation when he says; "If laws were needed to abolish abuses which your professional investigations have unearthed, your fraternity should not be strangers to the agencies which make the laws. Let me also remind you of the application to your case of the truth embodied in the homely injunction, 'If you want a job well done do it yourself,' If members of your profession were oftener found in our national and state legislature assemblies ready to advocate

the reformatory measures you have demonstrated to be necessary, the prospect of your bestowal upon your fellow-men of the ripened results of your professional labor would be lighter and nearer."

How much plainer could the truth be stated to us by one who knows our serious dereliction of civic duties? The recent failure of the state board of health to gain legal recognition for the enforcement of an advanced standard of medical education is a sad reflection on our waning power and influence and is simply a glaring illustration of how completely we are at the mercy of shrewd politicians and the willingness with which we succumb to such shameful treatment.

On the other hand the legal indorsement of quackery shows at once what can be done by paying heed to Mr. Cleveland's advice, for this was undoubtedly accomplished by political influence and proves conclusively the great and growing need of adding to our list of standing committees in our state society, a special one on medical legislation whose duties should be to look out for the possible enactment of such laws by statesmen who are more or less ignorant of their true motive or merit or even fraudulent basis.

To be of value such a committee should be furnished with all the authority and power to employ proper counsel to defend ourselves from such impositions and the expense attached should willingly be granted from the general fund or subscribed pro-rata by the membership of this association. While we deplore the inroads made on the sanctity of our profession by such intruders, I am one of those who believe that we as a profession can assert enough power and influence even yet in Missouri, to counteract any such legislation, providing we act as a unit, and I believe we can secure for ourselves any needed reasonable legislation that we indorse as being worthy.

Another illustration which aptly pictures our present political weakness was the recent appointment of Homœopaths to take charge of the state insane asylum at Fulton, Mo. This movement called forth at the time more interest than is usual among the profession but in spite of the



vigorous protest by ourselves and others the governor of this state proceeded to appoint a homœopathic staff, thus wresting from us one of the oldest institutions of the state. In making this statement I do not intend to convey the idea that I am opposed to homœopaths treating the insane, but in view of the fact that our state insane asylums are now to some extent at least overcrowded, this could easily be obviated by appropriating sufficient means to found a new insane hospital for the exclusive use of the homœopathic physicians.

The present action of the governor is even more deplorable when we remember the relative strength of the two medical bodies in the state. Out of about five thousand physicians less than four per cent. are homœopaths. No wonder the laity loses confidence in our importance and doubts our ability to even maintain our own cause. This gross lack of interest in public affairs is also largely the responsible agent for the present unsettled condition of the medical profession and leads up to the formation of all kinds of un-professional conduct and shady schemes in which shrewd business men often hire out physicians as it were, under cover of charity while many of the more ethical members of our profession look on in amazement and regret that such things could ever exist. Time will not permit further enlargement of the many civic duties we owe our community and state but I cannot close this paper without a brief reference to a duty we owe as citizens of this glorious republic, to our nation.

It has been long conceded that the medical profession could materially enhance its usefulness as a public benefactor if it was properly represented in not only municipal and state affairs but also those of the nation. It has been suggested therefore, that we insist on recognition by urging upon those who have the power to create a National Medical Bureau like that of law; and thus insure for the science of medicine a place in the national cabinet. In this connection I cannot do better than emphasize the wise counsel offered by our friend, Dr. C. H. Hughes, of St. Louis, in a recent issue of the ALIENIST AND NEUROL-

OGIST, when he says: "As a physician, a practitioner of the healing art, a teacher of medicine in school and with journal, I dare to proclaim that the wisest and best thing that this government can do, both for its present and future welfare, for its perpetuity and growth among the nations, the most powerful, most beneficent and grandest of governments, would be to create a Bureau of Sanitation, not merely to keep out foreign epidemics of contagious diseases, but for psychical and physical sanitation of the many forms of diseases of the mind and body known to the science of modern medical progress, and recognize the profession of medicine as it does that of law, of agriculture and arms, by giving the most distinguished and capable of its votaries a proper and deserving place in the cabinet of the nation."

In thus calling your attention to a subject which seems to me both proper and timely, I do not wish to be understood as considering myself called upon by you to advocate reforms, nor do I expect you to act upon any suggestions which I may have made, unless they appeal to your better judgment, for it must be confessed that they embody problems that are not easy of solution. Yet we must remember that all forward movements are attended with opposition and I take it this will form no exception, as there are always men to be found in our profession who are ever ready to antagonize any step in advance, whether they understand the questions at issue or not, but facts are stubborn things and it takes but little insight to recognize the woeful indifference manifest by our profession in civic matters which are of a purely medical character, and it is the purpose of this paper to try and enlist your united interest and support in formulating some means or methods by which to overcome our seeming indifference and thus regain for ourselves the power and influence which properly belongs to our noble calling.